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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MOSCOW 006130

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KMPI RS

SUBJECT: FORUM FOR THE FUTURE PLANNING MEETING, MOSCOW, MAY 30, 2006

Classified By: Minister Counselor for Political Affairs Kirk Augustine.
Reasons: 1.4(B/D).

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Participants at the second Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) Forum for the Future planning meeting agreed that the 2006 Forum will take place at the Dead Sea on December 3, preceded by a senior officials meeting and working dinner for ministers on December 2. Jordan circulated a draft agenda for the ministerial and requested comments. Participants discussed the role of civil society representatives in the Forum, with Egypt arguing that the NGO role at the 2005 Bahrain Forum was too large, and other participants saying it was a good precedent. Italy and Egypt tabled proposals for an inter-cultural dialogue, but most other participants felt that it fell outside the scope of the BMENA initiative. Participants agreed on four themes for the Civil Society Dialogue. Russia outlined its independent plans for academic seminars on Middle East topics to be held in Moscow in June and St. Petersburg in September. The next planning meeting will be held in early September in Jordan. End summary.

¶2. (U) Russia and Jordan co-chaired the second 2006 Forum for the Future planning meeting in Moscow on May 30. The Department was represented by NEA DAS Scott Carpenter, EUR PDAS Kurt Volker, DRL DAS Erica Barks-Ruggles, NEA/PI Blake Thorkelson, and Embassy Moscow poloff Les Viguerie.

OPENING SESSION

¶3. (SBU) Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Saltanov opened the meeting by saying that Russia was satisfied with progress under its G8 presidency, including continuity for prior G8 initiatives such as BMENA. He noted that reform is being hampered by conflicts in the region, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iraq. Jordanian MFA legal director Bisher Khasawnah said that the overarching Forum theme for 2006 is political and economic empowerment and that all delegations had agreed on the importance of civil society participation. The Russian Ministries of Education and Finance provided read-outs of the BMENA Education and Finance Ministerials held in Sharm el-Sheikh in late May.

FORUM FOR THE FUTURE PREPARATIONS

¶4. (SBU) Turning to the Forum itself, participants agreed that the ministerial will take place on December 3 at the Dead Sea, with senior officials meeting the day before. Jordan said that the Forum would cost \$850,000, offered to share a detailed budget, and proposed a trust-fund type arrangement that would support the 2006 and future Forum meetings through voluntary donations from governments. Participants agreed that ministers should hold an informal dinner the evening of December 2 to discuss regional political issues. DAS Carpenter said that the December 3 ministerial is on the Secretary's schedule, but we are unsure of her participation in the dinner as we do not know when she will be arriving and departing Jordan.

¶5. (SBU) Jordan circulated a draft agenda for the ministerial session. Participants agreed that the agenda would be discussed further at the September planning meeting, and Jordan asked all delegations to send comments on the agenda. Jordan will circulate new drafts of the senior officials and ministerial meetings before the next planning meeting, which will take place sometime between September 4 and 13 in Amman.

CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION

¶6. (SBU) The UK FCO's Frances Guy and Bahrain MFA's Shaikh Abdul Aziz bin Mubarak Al Khalifa described civil society activities in 2005. Guy stressed that the 2005 Civil Society Dialogue themes were linked to the Forum agenda, and that NGO representatives were self-selecting. Shaikh Abdul Aziz noted that the balance of government and NGO delegations in the

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2005 Forum was about 50/50, including participants from the Civil Society and Democracy Assistance Dialogues. The presence of NGOs is of utmost importance, he said. Shaikh Abdul Aziz also described Bahrain's experience with the Illel8 civil society conference, which the GOB facilitated, while insisting that the conference's themes must not overlap with Civil Society Dialogue themes. Allowing 300 civil society representatives to participate in the parallel conference prevented any unrest or demonstrations.

¶7. (SBU) Guy noted that much work is already being done on the proposed themes for 2006 (on transparency, legal environment, youth engagement, and independent judiciary), so it is important not to duplicate that work. Participants endorsed her offer to work with the World Bank's Middle East Development Forum on the transparency and youth themes and with the UN Development Program on the judicial theme. Guy will organize a meeting with them on the margins of the Democracy Assistance Dialogue meeting in Yemen in late June. DAS Carpenter offered U.S. sponsorship of the legal environment theme, which the group welcomed.

EGYPTIAN OBJECTIONS

¶8. (SBU) Egyptian MFA Assistant to the Minister Mohammad Shaaban raised objections to the plans for civil society participation. He wanted to avoid the Bahrain format, which was a joint meeting of civil society and governments that he felt was dominated by civil society. He expressed concerns that some NGOs are actually just individuals, and are not legally registered. Jordanian Ministry of Planning official Nasser Shraideh said that the Bahrain precedent would be respected: civil society representatives will be present throughout the ministerial to report on their work and reflect on government-led initiatives. &We can't go back,⁸ he said, a sentiment that was echoed by the entire U.S., UK, German, EU, and Bahraini delegations. Shraideh

also said that Forum organizers would not check whether each participating NGO was legally registered or not.

¶ 9. (SBU) In the discussion that followed, Moroccan MFA DG Youssef Amrani said that NGOs that participate in the Forum should be inclusive and representative of NGOs throughout the region. He said there are too many agenda items in the ministerial, and there should be a balance between topics discussed by senior officials and ministers. Russia and Jordan agreed on this point. German MFA director Andreas Reinicke endorsed the Bahrain example of NGO participation and said that the German MFA would be meeting with NGOs next month to encourage them to participate in BMENA projects. DAS Carpenter emphasized the importance of civil society participation in the Forum and said that the parallel civil society event is a political necessity to show civil society that it can and should be involved. Vershinin said that only those civil society organizations that are &legally registered in terms of national legislation⁸ should be invited to the Forum.

¶ 10. (SBU) At the end of the meeting, Shaaban reiterated that civil society should not supersede ministers, and said that his minister might not attend if the Forum was going to become a &civil society exercise.⁸ Vershinin said that a civil society &marathon⁸ was not a good idea. DAS Carpenter agreed that no one wants ministers to sit for 90 minutes of NGO presentations, and said the challenge is how to structure the agenda more interactively. He said the group should leave the agenda to Jordan and Russia to sort out, but that all governments had agreed to maintain at least the level of NGO participation at the Bahrain Forum. Shaikh Abdul Aziz stressed that civil society never had &an upper role⁸ at the 2005 Forum, because clear guidelines were given to the NGOs that they should discuss issues with application across the region, not just to one country. In prior Forums, it was the ministers, not civil society, who &hijacked⁸ the meeting with long interventions. He offered to work with Jordan on the agenda.

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ITALIAN AND EGYPTIAN PROPOSALS ON DIALOGUE ON PLURALISM

¶ 11. (SBU) Italian BMENA coordinator Sergio Scarantino circulated a proposal for a 2007 conference in Rome on a &Dialogue on Pluralism,⁸ saying there is a need to increase dialogue across cultures, religions, and ethical systems. This work would fall under the Democracy Assistance Dialogue (DAD) framework and complement the work of the Alliance of Civilizations. The goals would be to establish an inventory of current interfaith dialogues and NGOs active in this area, to examine the coexistence of different cultures and religions, and to balance freedom of expression with tolerance. A working group would determine what constitutes an offense to religion. Ambassador Shaaban then noted that the Sea Island BMENA statement includes a mention of work on tolerance and respect that has not been followed up. He called for a dialogue of cultures, including different religions and traditions, and said that it should fall outside the DAD but within BMENA.

¶ 12. (SBU) Several participants questioned these proposals. DAS Carpenter said that inter-cultural dialogue should be the subject of an entire initiative, linked to the Alliance of Civilizations, EuroMed, and OSCE processes, but should fall outside of BMENA. This view was seconded by Morocco, Turkey, Jordan, the UK, and Germany. Scarantino said that Italy would take stock of these observations, but noted that while other initiatives included only governments, the Italian proposal included civil society, media, and experts.

RUSSIAN SEMINARS

¶13. (SBU) Russian MFA MENA deputy director Oleg Ozerov described the two seminars Russia will organize on BMENA topics in 2006. The first, on June 7 in Moscow, is entitled &BMENA Region: Political Reforms and Security⁸ and will focus on political processes, security and non-proliferation, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The seminar will be sponsored by Moscow State University and participants will include prominent academics from Russia, the UAE, and the UK, Russian businessmen, and Lebanese diplomatic officials. Russia circulated a concept paper for the second seminar, &BMENA: An Overview of Trends in Education, Economics, and Politics, and the General Prospects of the Region,⁸ sponsored by St. Petersburg State University in September or October.

OTHER COMMENTS

¶14. (SBU) Japan: MFA MENA director Motohide Yoshikawa circulated a presentation on Japan,s work on vocational training and women,s empowerment. He said he is encountering &workshop fatigue⁸ among Japanese experts and called for more concrete workshops and fewer conferences. He complained that Japan,s \$10 million contribution to the IFC,s Private Enterprise Partnership had not been used. The European Commission,s Andres Bassols Soldevila called for more information on all BMENA events and said that civil society should be included as much as possible. Bahrain,s Shaikh Abdul Aziz said that the Center for Entrepreneurial Excellence in Bahrain is &struggling⁸ because only the U.S. and UK have supported it. He called for G8 support for the Center. Shaaban circulated a list of responses to Egypt,s proposal to establish a consortium of independent G8 and BMENA research institutions and academic centers to offer advice on regional development, and requested that all governments send contact information of institutions that would be interested.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) An important precedent was set at the Bahrain Forum for the Future in November 2005, where civil society organizations sat at the table as equal participants with

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governments. That this precedent is now being questioned is troubling. The U.S. will need to engage with Jordan, to provide moral support as it develops the final structure for the Forum; with Bahrain, which can offer Jordan useful lessons learned from 2005; and with Egypt, to gauge the seriousness of Ambassador Shaaban,s threat of a boycott if the civil society/government roles are not more &balanced.⁸

The planning meeting showed Egypt to be isolated in its position, but a comment by Russia,s Vershinin that the Forum must be &worth my minister,s time⁸ demonstrates the importance of crafting an agenda that continues robust and equal civil society participation while also giving a central role to government representatives. Vershinin and Shaaban,s statement that the legal registration of participating NGOs should be vetted is another example of the continuing difficulties we will face with Russia and Egypt on NGO issues)-not only in the context of the Forum for the Future, but also in our bilateral relations. We will need to be vigilant in supporting the strong role of our civil society partners in the face of this opposition.

¶16. (C) This cable has been cleared by Deputy Assistant Secretaries Scott Carpenter, Erica Barks-Ruggles and Kurt

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